



Full length article

Big fish: Prestige and admiration in game studies scholarship



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 16 March 2015

Received in revised form

18 November 2015

Accepted 6 December 2015

Available online 17 December 2015

Keywords:

Social network analysis

Game studies

Prestige

Admiration

Gender

ABSTRACT

Game studies is a wide and shallow field that is still developing an identity in academia. This study demonstrates how a descriptive social network analysis can examine admiration and prestige in a relatively small academic field. The results of this study suggests that: male and female game scholars were more likely to admire male game scholars over female game scholars and the group with the highest prestige were full professors while the group most admired were associate professors/senior lecturers. Visual analyses highlight the role of geography, gender, and rank as key indicators of admiration and prestige. Limitations and conclusions focus on the breadth of games scholarship and the definition of this emerging field.

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1. Introduction

People are often profoundly moved by leaders, saints, benefactors, and heroes, as well as people who do extraordinary things. The positive emotional responses elicited by exemplary others are well documented in psychology research (Fredrickson, 1998, 2004; Fredrickson & Losada, 2005; Haidt, 2003a, 2003b; Haidt & Keltner, 1999; Henrich & Gil-White, 2001). When we look at another set of positive emotions called other-praising emotions (Haidt, 2003), research is not as prevalent. Admiration and prestige are two other-praising emotions that examine the emotional response to non-moral excellence (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001; Lockwood & Kunda, 1997, 1999). Admiration is described ‘surprise associated with some pleasure and a sense of approval (Darwin & Ekman, 1998, p. 269)’. Ortoney, Clore, and Collins (1988) use admiration as the most representative example to describe appreciation, awe, esteem, and respect.

In the age of Twitter and Google Scholar admiration in the academic world may look different. There are few empirical works on feelings of admiration but research on prestige does exist (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001; Lockwood & Kunda, 1997, 1999; Thrash & Elliot, 2003, 2004). Existing literature on prestige concludes that freely-conferred deference has evolved as part of the human capacity for culture. This anthropological view suggests that as humans began to do most of their learning by copying others, it became

important to find the best role models to copy. Individuals who excel in any culturally valued skill therefore draw attention and followers. Followers feel admiration for these role-models (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997, 1999) emphasizing the role of feeling inspiration from a highly competent other.

The number and quality of links that are formed when measured in a specific population differentiate admiration and prestige. Admired individuals demonstrate many individual connections and can be quantified in specific groups (see Fig. 1). For example a survey of astronauts may show that the people most admired in the field are those that have been to moon, specifying an event or quality about a person. Prestige is not measured so easily and is conferred upon certain individuals who display nobility and great achievement (Schlenker, 2008). Their laudable achievements and praiseworthy actions make them “heroes” who are thought to contribute to a group’s prosperity and ability to survive more than any other (see Figs. 2 and 3). This recognition and emulation of prestigious individuals facilitates infocopying and spreads vital skills in a group.

Using the field of psychology and in particular other-praising (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001; Lockwood & Kunda, 1997, 1999) this paper examines the relatively small but growing field of game studies and asks scholars in the field ‘which games scholars do you admire?’

1.1. Game studies and game research

The field of games scholarship has undergone a transition over

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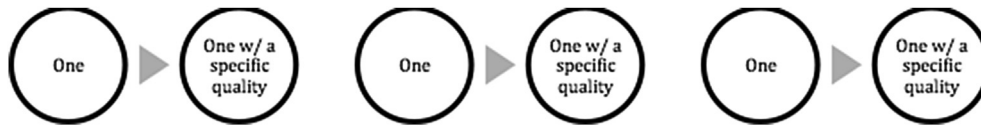


Fig. 1. Admired individuals are associated with a specific quality that can be quantified and grouped with other admired individuals.

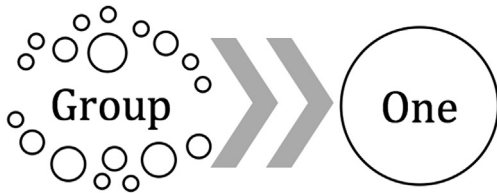


Fig. 2. Prestigious individuals are associated with approval and esteem that is not measured by one quality or action alone.

Continent of Residence

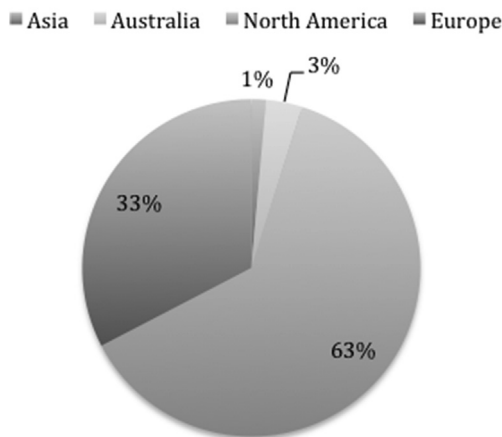


Fig. 3. Pie chart of scholars broken down by continent of residence. A large percent (63%) of the game scholars were from North America (only Canada and the USA were represented in responses). Of the 63% of game scholars from North America 56.25% were from the USA.

the last thirty years (Aarseth, 2015; Zagal & Bruckman, 2008; Zimmerman, 2012). Research has progressed from exploring one game experience to asking what it means to understand games (Davidson, 2011; Thomas, 2013; Zagal, 2008). In 2008, Jose Zagal wrote in *Games Studies* that, “the increasing cultural importance of videogames coincides with an increased demand for knowledge, skills, and training for people who have an interest in studying games. Game studies is coalescing around researchers from multiple disciplines and scholarly backgrounds, and the field has only just started to establish its own identity.” Seven years later when we ask what it means to understand games, have a critical discussion about them, or be literate in games there are dozens of websites, academic journals, industry magazines, professional organizations, and a proliferation of bachelors, masters, and doctorate programmes that put their own spin on game studies (Aarseth, 2015). The founders of the field have come from computer science, sociology, media studies and other fields (Heineman, 2014; Thomas, 2013) but over the course of the last ten years there have been a new generation of scholars who are graduating with degrees in game studies, making the field a viable, international

academic field fuelled by its trans disciplinary nature. The convergence of the field has occurred in spurts with the development of programs aimed at one aspect or another of game studies such as artificial intelligence, procedural content generation, rhetoric, and art. This specialization has created niches of expertise in university programmes and organizations that have allowed streams of innovation to form both within subject specific domains like computer science as well as being shared across game studies (Ryan, Kaltman, Mateas, & Wardrip-Fruin, 2015). Given the diversity of game studies, accounting for both academic immigrants from other disciplines and those trained directly in game studies, what does the field currently look like? Where are pockets of discipline specific games scholars and who do they align with?

One possible way to examine the above questions is to look at game studies from the angle of a social network, using the psychology of other-praising to create a web that explores the connections between various scholars, domains, and research. By looking at how games scholars interact with each other through the lens of admiration and prestige we gain insight into how different disciplines have intertwined and who the people are within these disciplines that are shaping the way forward for games studies.

2. Methods and data analysis

In order to explore the worldwide network of game scholars the researcher used broad search terms on social networks Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook to first ascertain the online communities that would host game scholars. Fifty-four networks were found with Gamesnetwork listserv, Serious Games group on LinkedIn, ECREA Facebook group, Games Research Facebook group, Association of Internet Researchers Facebook group, and ICA Facebook group each mentioned at least five times (see Table 1). To get the highest level of feedback the researcher decided to focus on asking one question and limiting the answers to three responses for each participant. With the tag line ‘the Coolest Game Scholar You Know’ a group message was sent to all five social networks with the request to respond to the question, “please list the three game scholars whose work you admire.”

A snowball sampling of the people that had been nominated followed the request for information. This allowed the researcher to gather information about each of the nominated scholars as well as contact them to ask whom they admire. The purpose of this sampling was to reach saturation. A total of 453 emails were sent after the initial request for information and saturation was never reached due to non-response and no provided definition of game scholarship; meaning responses were widespread from scholars nominating developers of war games to games journalists, board game creators to media professors. Not every scholar nominated three people and after two weeks and seven iterations of the snowball sampling a total of 941 nominations from 495 people had been received. Data collection on each of these nominations started soon after information for each nominator and nominee was collected via public websites (see Table 2).

The information provided allowed the researcher to collect additional information for each nominator and nominee such as the current country of residence, current department, graduate degree

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